



Access To, Participation and Progress in the General Education Curriculum

"The comprehensive planning process has given stakeholders an important role in informing OSEP on how IDEA Part D national activities can help improve results for children with disabilities."

Lou Danielson, Ph.D.
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Research to Practice

Experts Inform Part D National Program Plan

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) launched a long-range, comprehensive planning process for Part D of the reauthorized 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. OSEP's goal for its Part D national program is to link best practices to states, school systems, and families to improve results for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Part D of IDEA '97 authorizes national program activities and federal funding (see figure, this page).

OSEP undertook a significant initiative in implementing the Part D national program comprehensive planning process. Among

the activities undertaken were:

- Solicit opinions about the Part D national program through mass distribution of an opinion survey.
- Convene experts to identify issues in key program areas and make recommendations for how the Part D national program may address them.
- Use recommendations from the opinion survey, panels, and other national and state sources to develop a five-year Part D national program plan.

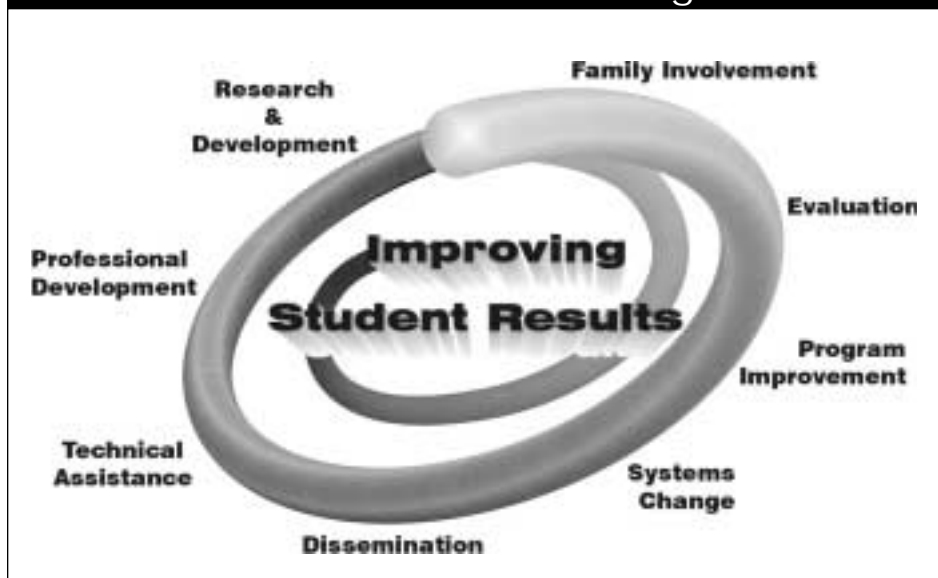
This brief focuses on the opinions of national authorities regarding the improvement of students with disabilities' access to, participation and progress in the general education curriculum.

Findings

IDEA places significant emphasis on helping children with disabilities, at an individually appropriate level, participate and progress in the general education curriculum. The IEP must include accommodations, modifications, and any special services that the child needs to access the general education curriculum, as well as identify supports service providers need to carry out the child's program.

The authorities identified the following three issues as being most influential in affecting students' access to the general education curriculum, noting that they must be addressed if access, participation, and progress are to increase. They also suggested how Part D national program activities in part might address these issues through research and knowledge building, public awareness, and

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support, and capacity building.

Issue 1: Definitions are needed for the terms access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum.

General education and special education stakeholders do not have a shared understanding of the IDEA provisions related to access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum. The terms access, participation, and progress have not been operationally defined in practice, and there is great variation in how these terms currently are being used. Moreover, professionals disagree about what constitutes the general education curriculum. For some, curriculum refers strictly to the district or state mandated academic study. Others view curriculum more broadly (e.g., social, communication, orientation and mobility, life skills, and self-determination skills).

Lacking a clear consensus of these terms undermines policy, research, and practice activities. To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might focus on defining key terms and concepts for students at different ages and with different disabilities.

Issue 2: It is difficult to meet the individualized educational needs of students with disabilities in the general education curriculum.

Although some progress has been made, many students with disabilities do not have access to general education curriculum and instruction. The barriers vary and may include:

- Using instructional practices, assessment techniques, and materials that are outdated, inappropriate for the curriculum standards and goals, not reflective of current research on best practices, and that are insufficient to accommodate diverse and multifaceted needs.

- Not providing supplemental supports and aids necessary for participation.

The issue is compounded further because little is known about how students with disabilities acquire, maintain, and apply knowledge and skills in general education curriculum settings, and what teaching strategies may, in fact, lead to better outcomes. For students who do not make adequate progress in the general education curriculum and who require more intensive, individualized instruction, few strong empirically documented treatments have been identified for ensuring that important skills are acquired, maintained, and transferred.

Without sound pedagogy, it will be difficult for students with disabilities to access, participate, and progress in the general education curriculum. To this end, the authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might advance research and knowledge production, as well as build the capacity for the application of research-based instructional methods and materials that enable teachers and direct service providers to tailor instruction, assessments, and interventions to meet individual needs.

Issue 3: More school-based and district level support is needed to support students with disabilities in accessing, participating, and progressing in the general education curriculum.

Progress for students with disabilities in the general education curriculum requires a system in which all stakeholders within the classroom, school, and community work together for the students' benefit.

Authorities suggested that Part D national program activities might support research and knowledge production of formal and informal structures and supports at all

levels of the school and district that enable and support stakeholders (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers, parents, related service providers, administrators, and the students themselves) working together to address all students' learning needs in a rigorous curriculum aligned with high standards. In addition, Part D national programs might strengthen capacity by supporting the development and delivery of professional development and technical assistance designed to build stakeholder knowledge and skills related to improving services and results for students with disabilities.

Next Steps

OSEP staff members are currently discussing the implications of expert opinions. Their results, along with those of the consumer survey and other relevant planning information—such as the findings of Parts B and C monitoring and oversight efforts and State Improvement Grant Program proposals, as required under Part D, Subpart 2 of IDEA—are being integrated by agency-wide staff workgroups into a comprehensive Part D national program plan. The public will be invited to comment on the Part D national program plan before it is presented to Congress for approval. ■

**The comprehensive planning process is authorized by IDEA [sec. 661(1)].*

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